

**THE BELL: Hearts & Minds**  
Episode 4 – Who Needs Integration?

**Ethan:** Hey listeners, my name is Ethan. I used to be Mr. McGraw’s student. I hope you enjoy The Bell. If you want more people to hear students’ voices, go to Apple Podcasts and leave a review. It really helps new listeners discover the show, and it only takes a few minutes. Thanks people, now here’s your host Mr. McGraw aka “curls for the girls.”

**Taylor:** Thanks Ethan, and just to be clear, “curls for the girls” was not a part of that script. But I’ll make you guys a deal. If we hit 100 reviews on Apple Podcasts, I’ll let Ethan explain how I got that nickname.

For those who don’t know, The Bell is a platform that elevates the voices of students in the conversation about education, and empowers them to lead the fight for their futures. On this first season of our podcast, called *Hearts and Minds*, we explore school segregation through the voices of those most impacted by it: students.

If you haven’t listened to the first three episodes, you should pause now and go back and start from the beginning.

**Ethan:** No one likes a line cutter.

**Taylor:** This is Episode 4: Who needs integration?

It’s brought to you by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority – delaying trains all summer so you have time to listen.

[Clip from delayed subway party]

**Taylor:** About a month ago, I was on a delayed subway train – and unfortunately there was no impromptu sing-a-long – so I opened my PocketCasts app, queued up one of my podcasts and hit play.

**Gladwell:** Hi, I’m Malcolm Gladwell, and you’re listening to Revisionist History, my podcast about things overlooked and misunderstood.

**Taylor:** The episode – called Mrs. Buchanan’s Period of Adjustment – is about school desegregation in the South. It features an interview with Leola Brown, whose family was at the center of the landmark Supreme Court case that bears their name: Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka,

Kansas. Leola's daughter Linda attended an all-black elementary school called Monroe and was barred from entering an all-white school that was closer to home.

**Gladwell:** Leola Brown grew up in Topeka. She went to Monroe as well and Leola Brown makes it very clear that she loved Monroe. "Monroe was wonderful I'll tell you it was wonderful. And had it not been for this, you know going so far to school, we possibly never would have you know; done what we did."

**Taylor:** "We possibly never would have done what we did." What they did, of course, was help dismantle the system of school segregation in 18 states across the South and Midwest. But if you ask Leola Brown, there was nothing wrong with the black schools. She just wanted her family to have the option of choosing the other ones. Gladwell uses her testimony to challenge the common interpretation that segregated schools were inherently inferior. I won't spoil the episode for you. Give it a listen yourself. Again, it's called Revisionist History.

When I listened to it, I was reminded of an exchange I witnessed almost two years ago between two well respected African American scholars who had a core disagreement about school integration.

**NHJ:** I remember a few years ago when the UCLA Civil Rights Project released a report naming New York state as the most segregated state for black children in the country and New York City the most segregated school system in the country, I remember distinctly the headlines all across the land were "You will never believe where the most segregated school are – they are not in the South."

**Taylor:** Meet scholar number one: Nikole Hannah-Jones, a New York Times reporter who covers race and education. I've cited her before. She's one of the leading authorities on school segregation and gets invited to talk about it a lot.

This particular event is at the Brooklyn Historical Society in the fall of 2015. Hannah-Jones is sitting on stage at the end of a long table of six panelists, moderating a program called "Our Segregated Schools Epidemic: Tales from the Frontlines." In a room of beiges and grays, the moderator stands out in her orange suit jacket and red hair. There are about 150 people in the crowd, drinking Brooklyn Lagers, sipping white wine. I'm in the front row.

**Hannah-Jones:** It is only that because we are progressive in this city and we believe that this is a place that would never tolerate segregation that we have allowed ourselves to deny what has been going on in the city for more than four decades, five decades, six decades.

**Taylor:** She goes on to lead a stimulating panel discussion that combines data with personal experience and historical context. (If you want to watch it, I've embedded the video on this episode's page at [bellpodcast.com](http://bellpodcast.com).) The disagreement between the two scholars comes after the panel, when Hannah-Jones invites audience comments. Meet scholar number two.

**Rock:** This has been an excellent program and we do need to talk about race, but I want to point out my name is Daryl Rock. I was a principal for 10 years in Brooklyn, in district 13 at Benjamin High School. And this is what I want the panel to think about. Our school was totally segregated. All black kids, all black teachers. And we had the highest graduation rate in New York state for black students.

**Taylor:** Daryl Rock is middle aged. His long dreadlocks have some gray in them. The whole time he's speaking Nikole Hannah-Jones has a look on her face that says she knows where this argument is going.

**Rock:** Maybe we don't need to go to those schools. If we put the energy and effort into improving our schools... And what do you think the kids think about, "Oh I have to go with them so that I'm better." We don't need to go to those schools. We have to get the right people to educate our children. Again, our school – all black kids, all black teachers. It's a wonderful place for kids to go to school. You have people that cared about you, that weren't afraid about you, that were going to motivate and push you to make sure that you were successful.

**Taylor:** Here's how Hannah-Jones responds.

**Hannah-Jones:** I mean absolutely, I think, of course. A lot of. We actually chose to enroll our child in a segregated school intentionally. But as a reporter I have to point out that that experience is exceptional. That is not the norm. That is, you almost never find high schools... you can sometimes find segregated elementary schools that are producing the same results. But that is not the norm anywhere in the country and educators will tell you that. The other thing is that, what I have found sadly, because I am a cynical person after studying education for a long time. Is there is no perfect experience for black children. Whether they are in a segregated school or integrated school, it's a matter of mitigating which burden will my child have, because there will be one and that is clear.

And I guess the last thing that I would say is we have been since *Plessy v. Ferguson* in the 1800s promising to make separate equal for black kids. We have not done it. For a single day in a single district in a single school – we have not done it. So I think to keep hoping that eventually we will do it, that eventually when you separate all the poor black kids in one

school that the people in power will one day give those kids what they deserve, we just have not seen it. It's just not based on reality.

**Taylor:** The two scholars continue to go back and forth.

**Rock:** If you look at the segregated schools in the South before integration those kids were successful. There's a book called the *Highest Potential*. Everybody needs to read it. It talks about those segregated schools in the South and the culture that was in those schools is what lead to those kids being successful.

**Taylor:** Then, Hannah-Jones ends it by saying:

**Hannah-Jones:** No ones arguing. We should probably do both. But there's a reason the Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board*, and it's because those schools were not equal in the South either.

**Taylor:** We'll come back to this exchange at the end of the episode, but first, a couple of younger scholars have some things they want to say.

**Tonie:** Okay, so my school is in Fort Greene/Clinton Hill which is a gentrified neighborhood which means you would expect students from the neighborhood to be going to the school in the neighborhood but that's not the case. My school is predominantly black and Hispanic.

**Taylor:** This is Tonie. She was one of my students last year in a college prep program called Sponsors for Educational Opportunity or SEO. All of the students in my SEO writing class went to different high schools.

**Tonie:** There's no type of diversity and I wish there was more. Because I only have black friends. I know nothing but black people. I mean, there's nothing wrong with black people, but can I learn something else about other people?

**Taylor:** How did Tonie choose her school?

**Tonie:** I remember I went to the Brooklyn Tech high school fair and that's when I learned about my high school. And other schools I wanted to go to either Edward Morrow or Brooklyn Academy or other schools but I ended up choosing my school because my friend was going there and I was afraid to start somewhere new by myself. They kind of made my school seem like early college, but I feel like the system is kind of rigged. In the book, on the

page, it says you need a certain average to get in. And they keep certain standards and uniform. All these things that made me think it's a really strict school, and I get here and it's completely different. That all went out the window. Even Africa tours. That's one of the other reasons why I wanted to go to my school because I wanted to try something new. I just wanted to connect with myself.

**Taylor:** If you missed that, Tonie said part of the reason she chose her school is because they took students on trips to Africa, and she really wanted to do that to connect with herself. But by the time she got there they stopped doing the trips.

**Taylor (during interview):** How else was it different because you came from a charter school?

**Tonie:** I was about to say. I came from Achievement First, and it was really strict. Down to the socks. Like your socks had to be black.

**Taylor:** Achievement First is a network of charter schools, primarily in Brooklyn. Full disclosure: I taught at an Achievement First high school in Bushwick last year. Tonie's not exaggerating about how strict it is.

**Tonie:** I step into my high school, first day. Children are screaming in the hallways. I'm like, what are you doing? The cafeteria was crazy. I didn't even know where I was supposed to go. The schedule wasn't printed it was really unorganized and I wasn't used to that. I was thinking – people told me not to go to a public high school and then I found my school and I was like I know my schools not going to be like that because of all these good things in the book. And then I get there and it's kind of like what people were telling me and I'm starting to regret going to my high school.

**Taylor:** This is becoming a theme when I talk to students – the school not matching its description. I asked Tonie to talk more about her academic experience.

**Tonie:** I was supposed to be in the media-focused discipline but there were also a pre-engineering and pre-med program and a general humanities program. Well, that's what the book said.

**Taylor:** But when she got there...

**Tonie:** People didn't know anything about it, so yeah.

**Taylor:** She also said:

**Tonie:** Well, we got a new principal this year, and he added so many APs this year.

**Taylor:** APs are Advanced Placement courses, which students can take for college credit.

**Tonie:** But I feel like it wasn't that effective. Originally I was supposed to be in AP U.S. Government. I signed up for the class last year, and I was not placed on the roster this year. So when I went to my guidance counselor she said there's not enough seats. That doesn't make sense. I'm kind of glad I'm not in the class because students are saying they're not learning anything and the teacher is not teaching about US government, he's teaching about his life. Like people care about that? Like why are you adding AP classes if the teachers have a curriculum they were supposed to outline and they're not following it.

**Taylor:** Tonie did share some positive aspects of her high school experience. Specifically, having black teachers.

**Tonie:** I feel like when you have a black teacher as a black student you feel you might get a different type of learning experience from that. My English class from sophomore and junior year I even though it was an English class I don't consider it exactly English. I feel like it was more sociology because my teacher was Japanese and African American and he liked to teach us about the black experience I guess. I wasn't really woke I guess until before that class. We read the autobiography of Malcolm X in that class and felt that was something important that we needed to read.

**Taylor:** This was a real contrast to Tonie's experience at Achievement First, which had a lot more white teachers.

**Tonie:** At Achievement First, I would have said I was pro all-lives-matter and I didn't realize that it's not about all lives mattering it's about people who are suffering and I just thought that if you're suffering you can motivate yourself to get out of the system. Or you can work hard but I didn't realize that odds were set against you. Or I knew odds were set against you but I didn't realize odds were systematically set against you.

**Taylor:** The name of Tonie's high school by the way? Benjamin Banneker Academy. The school where Daryl Rock was a principal for a decade. The school he said had the highest graduation rate for black students in New York State. He was gone by the time Tonie got there, but the graduation rate is still really high. Last year it was 97%.

But there's something Tonie alluded to that Rock didn't mention. Banneker is a screened high school. It selects only top middle school performers. So, it's unfair to compare the results at a school like Banneker to an unscreened school, say, the School for Classics in East New York, where Noah went. It's apples and oranges.

But the Department of Education figured out a way to compare apples to apples. On its annual school quality snapshot, each school is given a comparison group, made up of similar middle school performers who chose other high schools. The graduation rate of Banneker's comparison group? 95%-- which means Banneker did a slightly better than average job of graduating its students. But let's look at another stat, one that many argue is more important.

Last year, half of Banneker students graduated college ready, which is a quantitative measure based on Regents exam scores. In Banneker's comparison group? Nearly three fourths graduated college ready. Meaning Banneker did a below average job of getting students ready for college.

The point of all this: Schools are complex. We can't judge them solely on a single person's perspective, whether it's Leola Brown, or Daryl Rock, or Mayor de Blasio, or the people who write the descriptions in the high school directory. When it comes to education, we need to do a better job of getting the whole story – and that necessarily involves listening to students.

After the break: We hear from a black student at a mostly white school. Stay tuned.

**Taylor (promo):** I really appreciate all of your encouraging e-mails, tweets, and especially those iTunes reviews. but there are ways to connect with us in person, too. The Bell supports a student-led coalition called Teens Take Charge that advocates for educational equity across New York City. In a few weeks, the students are hosting a really unique event at the historic Schomburg Center in Harlem. Students will be sharing their thoughts about education with political candidates and school officials live, on stage. You don't want to miss it. So mark your calendars. Tuesday, September 19th from 6 to 8 pm. Tickets are free and they're going fast. Find the event on The Bell's Facebook Page @bellpodcast or go to [Teenstakecharge.com](http://Teenstakecharge.com) and click on Events. We hope to see you there. Now, back to the show.

**Yacine:** My high school is I wanna say majority like 50% around that area white. It is more diverse than most schools but it's not as diverse as it could be.

**Taylor:** This is Yacine, another one of my SEO students. She's from Harlem but chose to go to Beacon, a selective high school in Hell's Kitchen.

**Yacine:** Like Tonie I went to a charter school, yeah my charter school was down to the T. You could get detention for anything. Looking back I think it was a good environment for me for middle school but high school I don't think. I think I could have prospered elsewhere. So I got the directory, I looked at every single page of the book. I decided. I put Millennium High School then Beacon. I didn't like tour Beacon. I didn't know where Beacon was. I don't even remember what attracted me to Beacon High School to be honest. Oh I also took the SHSAT, that was a funny test [Laughter].

**Taylor:** SHSAT stands for Specialized High School Admissions Test: a gatekeeper to the city's nine specialized public high schools.

**Yacine:** It was funny because like one I was unprepared for it. I went in like oh I'm the top of my class, I'm going to go take this test get into Stuyvesant. I took the test. It was so intimidating. It was a room full of white people. Literally and then. A couple of Asians. And then they all got up before me. And I was like ok what did I miss? What's happening? And then to find out I actually scored below... I don't... I have a whole thing with specialized high schools and I shouldn't of taken that, but whatever.

**Taylor:** So – Yacine didn't get into Stuyvesant, which by the way has the lowest percentage of black and Hispanic students of any high school in the city, about 3%. But Beacon, where she wound up, is consistently ranked among the city's top high schools. What was it like?

**Yacine:** My school is unique because of the resources we have. We just moved into a new building into, like, oh my god. Especially if you're into the arts like music and theatre and dance this school has so many resources for you, like, they have millions of dollars invested into instruments and recording studios. I was so shocked when I went down I was like yo this is crazy. But especially there it's very invested. I'm just starting to see the teachers are unique quality. Because a lot of teachers have stayed at my high school for a long time. I think because I had experienced teachers it was less like... they knew what we had to learn. And they were better at having us think critically as opposed to just memorizing material. Also, another reason why the school is unique is because we don't take regents. And teachers have the flexibility to teach what they want so they're not teaching to a test. And I think that has been such an amazing asset to my school because we are, for example, like there are certain topics we would have to cover that are not as interesting. Like for example I'm taking a class right now called "The Truth About Change." This class is literally changing me. On the first day he said ok you guys are going to change something in America. He said identify the largest problem. By the end of the semester you're going to change it. And when he told me that I was, like, no one has ever told me I had the power to change a societal problem I



had and that was just so empowering. Oh and they have great science facilities. It really reminds me of like a liberal arts college.

**Taylor:** So no tests, experienced teachers who have autonomy and teach classes about social change, state-of-the-art facilities. This is a far cry from the description I've gotten from any other student I've interviewed in New York City. What accounts for the difference? I think it's pretty simple. There are a lot of affluent white kids in Yacine's school. Officially, Beacon is 53% white, 22% Hispanic, 14% black, and 8% Asian. Just 24% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch, which is like three times lower than the city average.

Yacine said she has learned a lot from her peers, but the school has room to grow when it comes to diversity.

**Yacine:** There have been so many studies that show that when you're in a room and you're surrounded by students from different backgrounds you do better. The outcomes of that school is better because you're learning from their experiences and also it forces you to think critically. Because if you're talking about racism for example you're talking about it not from one lens and perspective but you have other people in the room that can add to that conversation.

**Taylor:** Yacine also has some thoughts about another education issue.

**Yacine:** I would also fix funding in education because if you look at where the money goes it's like there's huge disparities in how much Stuyvesant gets as opposed to your low income public school. Why is it that people who have less resources than me and people who have way more resources than me are looked at on the same level and it's not fair. I don't think zone schools should be bad schools. If you're going to your zoned school I think you should know that I'm going to get a quality education and not have to travel miles and boroughs to get a good education.

**Taylor:** As I'm listening to Yacine, all I can think about is whether her more affluent peers, who have never seen the other side of the education system, understand how good they've got it.

In April, Yacine participated in the first Teens Take Charge event at the Bronx Library Center. All of the students wrote letters about their educational experience and addressed them To Whom it Should Concern. You can read all of the letters at [teenstakecharge.com](http://teenstakecharge.com). Here's the recording of Yacine's performance from that night.

**Yacine:** [Reads letter]

To whom it should concern:

I live in the center of Harlem where I attended middle school. But now I go to an elite public high school in midtown. Two different worlds only 5 miles apart. At my high school, 93% of students graduate college ready. At my zone school in Harlem? 7%. I didn't realize that an A in Harlem was not the same as an A in a majority white high school on the upper west side. I had to go through this process on my own as a low income child of immigrants who did not understand the American education system. In my high school I have the privilege of walking through unlocked doors. Security guards sit in corners smiling wishing us good morning. Vast hallways, white walls, high ceilings, bright lights, my own textbooks I can bring home if I need to. I go to a school where the majority of students are white and I wonder how I made it there despite living in a neighborhood where opportunity is slight. Where teachers only stay in schools for 2 years before deciding they've had enough. Where poverty is high and expectations are low and I cannot help but think what made it this way. What happened in 5 miles that determined who got to graduate? Who went to college? Who got to explore their talents? Who learned to question? To whom it should concern. There are two different worlds only 5 miles apart. Please tell me what happened.

P.S. I've always been told I've had to work 2 times as hard. I put extra working hours into academics and studying so I would not end up at my local high school where I would be cast away as a statistic. I worked through the system to find ways to open up doors for myself. Going through ancient books to find rules to a foreign game. I was a black girl who was the daughter of immigrants with education to only hope of redefining herself. It was remarkable that I beat the odds and thought I'd find greener grass, but instead I was introduced to an elite education system that had no space for me. I walked into a school where my black and brown peers struggled to stay afloat and were barely passing their classes. I came into a school where we were made to leave our identities and struggles outside of the classroom. My elite school thought diversity ended when you put black and white students together and did not create space for us to learn off of those identities. No one told me about the rooms and spaces I would need to create for myself in order to survive. I wonder why the more the opportunities I attain the more I have to leave parts of me behind. I am useful beyond number, so I ask, when will you be able to find talented black and brown students and love us too?

**Taylor:** Yacine's letter reminds me of something Nikole Hannah-Jones said at the panel event a couple of years ago.

**Hannah-Jones:** What I have found sadly, because I am a cynical person after studying education for a long time is there is no perfect experience for black children. Whether they are in a segregated school or integrated school, it's a matter of mitigating which burden will my child have, because there will be one.

**Taylor:** The debate between Nikole Hannah-Jones and Daryl Rock is a big one in education right now. To be clear, I am firmly in the Nikole Hannah-Jones camp. We need to integrate our schools. I've always believed that schools should resemble the society we aspire to be, not the one we used to be. The way our schools are structured today is the same way our society will be structured a generation from now.

I want to clarify two things that I don't hear talked about enough:

Number one – Integration is just as, if not more important, for affluent white kids as it is for poor black and brown kids. School integration can go a long way toward breaking down racial barriers and helping white students understand their privilege. It certainly did for me when I was growing up.

And number two – Daryl Rock is right about a lot of the things he said. Students of color benefit from having teachers of color — but I'll add: so do white kids. We need to fully integrate our teaching force, not just our students. And Rock is absolutely right when he says schools have to be places where students feel valued and loved. Yacine benefited academically from her experience at Beacon, but she didn't always feel comfortable there. And that's unacceptable. Integration is not just the movement of bodies. At the risk of being corny, I think of integration as the movement of hearts & minds, as well as privilege and power and capital.

This fall, Tonie is headed to Boston College to study communications – and she plans to work on the school newspaper. Yacine is headed to Smith College to study biochemistry and sociology. She plans to run for class president. You can go ahead and give her your campaign contributions.

We have two more episodes coming your way this season that I cannot wait to share with you. We'll also be releasing a lot of bonus material soon because there's tons of great stuff that we haven't been able to fit into these episodes. If you like the show, seriously, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you're listening. Spread the word on Twitter and Facebook. You can tag us @bellpodcast. And if you have story ideas, questions, or comments go to [bellpodcast.com](http://bellpodcast.com) and click Contact.

Happy August, everybody. Teachers & students: hope you enjoy the last bit of summer. And for the rest of y'all, good luck with those commutes.

Thanks for listening.